



**U.S. Immigration
and Customs
Enforcement**

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News Release

Fugitive accused of “baby” smuggling arrested at Arizona border crossing

SAN LUIS, Arizona – The Yuma woman who allegedly specialized in bringing illegal alien infants and children into the United States as part of a Southern California-based human smuggling scheme was arrested this morning at the Arizona border.

Norma Higinia Felix De Sanchez, 41, was taken into custody at the port of entry at San Luis by U.S. Customs and Border Protection officers and turned over to U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents. De Sanchez is expected to make her initial appearance in federal court in Yuma this afternoon where she faces four criminal counts, including bringing illegal aliens into the United States, transporting illegal aliens, harboring illegal aliens, and conspiracy.

De Sanchez is among 11 defendants charged late last week as part of an ICE investigation into a sophisticated human smuggling organization that brought hundreds of illegal aliens into the United States from Mexico and helped them travel to cities across the nation. According to court documents filed in the case, De Sanchez brought the children through the port of entry in San Luis, Arizona using false identification documents. With her capture, five of the suspects remain at large.

“Time and again we see examples of the lengths smugglers will go to turn a quick profit,” said Julie Myers, Department of Homeland Security Assistant Secretary for Immigration and Customs Enforcement. “Smugglers see their victims as nothing more than human cargo and willingly mix violence with their criminal schemes. The allegation that this organization subjected children to these risks reinforces why the Department of Homeland Security is working so aggressively to shut down human smuggling rings.”

In other developments in the case, this weekend ICE agents reunited an infant rescued from the smuggling organization with its mother. The nine-month-old girl was recovered Thursday night when agents arrested the organization’s suspected ringleader and two other defendants at a trailer park in Ventura County. The infant was turned over to its mother Saturday.

The accused ringleader, Juan Ramirez-Ramirez, 37, also known as “El Diablo” and four other defendants made their initial appearance in federal court in Los Angeles late Friday. The five are accused of running a complex human smuggling scheme, which began with the aliens being directed to a hotel in Sonora, Mexico and then taken to so-called “drop houses” in Yuma, Arizona and Ventura County.

Those charged and arrested in the case are:

- Juan Ramirez-Ramirez, 37, of Oxnard, aka El Diablo, the organization's alleged ringleader;
- Maria Margarita Renovato-Rangel, 24, of Oxnard;
- Maria De Jesus Renovato-Rangel, 29, of Oxnard;
- Joel Rodriguez-Vargas (J. Rodriguez), 27, of Riverside;
- Manuel Leon-Morales, 62, of Los Angeles; and
- Norma Higinia Felix De Sanchez, 41, of Yuma.

Those charged in the case who remain at large are:

- Dario Rodriguez-Vargas (D. Rodriguez), 25, of Riverside, suspected driver;
- Cesar Huerta-Alcazar, 25, of Riverside, allegedly ran the Yuma "drop houses;"
- "John Doe," possibly known as "Cuache," coordinated aliens' transport from San Luis to Yuma;
- Martin Garcia-Lujan, 41, of Yuma; and
- Miguel Gonzalez-Hernandez, 27, of Los Angeles.

At Friday's hearing, the five defendants arrested last week were ordered held without bond. Three of those defendants - Maria Margarita Renovato-Rangel, Maria De Jesus Renovato-Rangel, and Manuel Leon-Morales - are scheduled for a preliminary hearing June 16 and arraignment June 19. The other two defendants - Juan Ramirez-Ramirez and Joel Rodriguez-Vargas - waived their right to a preliminary hearing and will be arraigned July 10.

According to the criminal complaint, Ramirez charged \$1,600 to \$2,000 for each illegal alien to be smuggled to the Los Angeles area from Mexico. The prices increased to as much as \$2,800 for aliens destined for other parts of the United States. Ramirez oversaw the payment of individuals who assisted the smuggling ring, including people at the Mexican hotel, "coyotes," "drop house" operators, and drivers. Based on intercepted phone calls, investigators believe the ring has smuggled more than 100 illegal aliens into the United States in the past six weeks alone.

The defendants allegedly directed relatives of aliens who wanted to enter the United States illegally to send their family members to the Hotel Internacional in San Luis Rio Colorado, Mexico. From the hotel, the ring's clients were led across the international border near San Luis, Arizona by "coyotes," who then arranged for their transport to the Yuma area.

Once in Yuma, the smuggled aliens were held in so-called "drop houses" until the organization's drivers could bring them to Ventura County. In some cases, the ring reportedly held the smuggled aliens in the "drop houses" with little food for more than three weeks. At a recently dismantled "drop house" allegedly used by the organization in Yuma, federal agents spotted a hand-written sign in the window reading "Help Us!"

ICE

U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement was established in March 2003 as the largest investigative arm of the Department of Homeland Security. ICE is comprised of four integrated divisions that form a 21st century law enforcement agency with broad responsibilities for a number of key homeland security priorities.